

AMHERST REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
MINUTES
August 11, 2010

LOCATION: First Floor Meeting Room, Town Hall

MEMBERS PRESENT: John Coull, Aaron Hayden, Lawrence Kelley, Margaret Roberts. Member Jeanne Traester was absent.

OTHERS PRESENT: Barbara Pearson, Winnifred Manning, John Fox, Seymour Friedman, Paige Wilder, others (unidentified)

STAFF PRESENT: Larry Shaffer (Town Manager), Jonathan Tucker (Planning Director)

The meeting was called to order at 7:35 p.m.

Announcements

Mr. Coull pointed out that several citizens had accompanied the Authority members to Hanover, NH. He said the Authority would try to make the same thing possible for the Mansfield (Storrs), CT visit.

Executive Session – None.

Minutes – None.

Public Comment Period

John Fox asked how many student units there had been in the development project in Hanover.

Barbara Pearson said that it would be nice to have additional housing as long as it wasn't undergraduate housing. She proposed graduate students or staff or faculty housing. The ARA should strive to avoid re-establishing the same "blight" of undergraduate behaviors (fraternities) as had been in the area in the past. Undergraduate housing required much more oversight.

Walter Wolnik expressed concern about the use of jargon in reference to form-based zoning in the draft RFP. : He asked about references to regulatory analysis. Mr. Tucker replied that it depended on the level of detail in the final RFP.

Adele Levine expressed concern about the impact of the development on the Lincoln Avenue area.

Mr. Tucker explained the public process described in the draft RFP. Mrs. Roberts emphasized that was to be a consulting process, not construction.

Mr. Shaffer pointed out that neither the Town nor the ARA owned any property in the area, but UMass did. As an arm of the Commonwealth, UMass was not bound by local zoning—it could move forward with a development of its own, and the community would have no control over it. This project provided an opportunity for the community to control what happens. He indicated that the Town and UMass and the neighbors were all on the same side in this project. He did not see this as an adversarial relationship.

Seymour Friedman asked that the planning area for the project area include the Phillips Street area. He noted that what had worked in the Hanover project was graduate student housing. He announced that UMass had just purchased a property on Fearing Street to provide a pedestrian corridor from Lincoln Apartments to that street.

Mr. Shaffer said that the Town was working on housing enforcement issues and increasing coordination between enforcement agencies. He cited recent work related to the house at 15-17 Fearing Street as an example.

Mr. Fox said that a collaborative effort was needed—the neighbors want to be involved.

Winnifred Manning said that Dartmouth College had been proactive. She did not think UMass was or would be.

Paige Wilder asked what the Southwest dormitory costs the Town in terms of police and fire. She said the Town needed to be able to predict the cost of a new development.

Mrs. Roberts said that the Authority was still in the learning phase.

Mr. Coull agreed, and called it a fact-finding phase.

Old Business

a. Site Visits

1) Hanover, NH Debriefing

Mr. Coull summarized the Authority's trip to Hanover, saying he liked the process the community had used, the collaboration with Dartmouth College, and the sense of the college's commitment to the community.

Mr. Hayden said he appreciated the staff summary of major lessons learned from the trip, and that the officials in Hanover had been very gracious. Hanover had the same problems as Amherst in terms of conversion of single family homes to student rentals, but their project had reversed that trend. He noted that they had defined the boundaries of the project with residential buffer buildings, and had brought students into supervised unit. Every new unit that was occupied lessened the pressure of student housing on adjacent neighborhoods and conversion back to single family homes had resulted. The community had saved and improved the space for an existing hardware store and other local businesses—the project provided services to the market of new residents.

He noted that the size of the project had been important to being able to do the project as well. There was a threshold. The community process had involved a lot of very dedicated people over a long period of time. In Amherst, the ARA was going to have to play the role of Dartmouth College.

Mr. Coull noted that the two 'transition' buffer residential buildings had deed restriction, so that occupancy and expectations could be controlled. Mr. Hayden agreed, pointing out that the units were also subsidized. He had been very impressed by the effect of putting the housing units downtown on parking demand—it had lowered, and 'car-shedding' had resulted.

Mrs. Roberts said that the main thing for her had been the community getting a real dialogue going such that people shed their own self-interest to a degree and were able to think about the good of the community. That was critical. The transition properties had worked. She noted that the Hanover planners had pushed the public interest. She said that it would be nice to have a Dartmouth, but the whole Amherst community could step up.

Mr. Coull said that someone visiting the community would not know the project was there. Mr. Kelley said it blended seamlessly into the downtown.

Mr. Shaffer pointed out that the project had taken 10 years and wasn't still in process. Dartmouth had deliberately phased it, to not overwhelm the downtown market. He said it was important to invest in appropriate process. Projects like this take time.

Mrs. Roberts said that Amherst's Kendrick Park consultant interview process had showed the importance of having a well-developed program of uses derived from a public process.

Mr. Kelley said he had been amazed how Dartmouth College had stepped up. He noted that student housing on campus in New Hampshire is taxable, so where that housing goes doesn't matter. The 25% discount for project space was important.

Mrs. Roberts indicated that Dartmouth College had its Real Estate offices downtown.

Mr. Coull said he believed that Amherst was experiencing a sea change in the attitudes of its educational institutions. The representatives being sent to engage with the Town on this project were at a much higher administrative level than previously, and could actually make decisions. He mentioned Deputy Chancellor Todd Diacon, who has the ear of the Chancellor and really wants to help. The simple fact that UMass approached the Town with regard to this project was an indicator of its interest and commitment. Mrs. Roberts agreed, saying that the need to attract new students and faculty competitively is being taken very seriously. Many public universities are doing so.

Mr. Coull said that the better the setting, the easier it is for them to attract the people they want.

Mr. Fox recommended inviting the UMass representatives along on the site visits. Ms. Levine said that UConn was a better example for Amherst to look at.

Mrs. Roberts said she wanted to look at the Storrs Center plans—which had a very successful public process.

Mr. Shaffer pointed out that UConn has a higher political profile in Connecticut than UMass/Amherst does in Massachusetts, and so received more state support of all kinds. He said the Storrs Center project was 6-7 years along.

Mrs. Roberts said the Authority should look for other examples, too.

Mr. Friedman pointed out that Hanover did not allow bars—40% of all business must be food sales. Dartmouth controls its students. Mr. Kelley said that Dartmouth representatives had indicated the opposite.

2) Site Visit – Storrs

Logistics for the September 16 site visit to Mansfield (Storrs), Connecticut were discussed. Mrs. Roberts said that the Storrs Center plan was more germane to what Amherst was considering.

b. Gateway District – Review of RFP

Mr. Coull noted that the Authority was scheduled to meet on August 25 for a working session on the RFP. Mrs. Roberts expressed concern that the zoning amendment portion of the project could not be ready in time for by the 2011 Annual Town Meeting. Mr. Tucker said that if that was the case, it could be moved to the Fall 2001 Special Town Meeting.

Mr. Freidman asked for a schedule of the proposed tasks. Mr. Coull said they could not be nailed down until a consultant was selected and even then it was a matter of planning for the best, most likely outcome.

Mr. Hayden left at 8:45 p.m.

An unidentified member of the audience asked if the RFP would include a feasibility analysis. There was extensive discussion of that issue.

Mr. Fox said that the Town needed a statement of commitment from UMass. Mr. Coull replied that the ARA and Town were working with UMass officials. There was no way at this point to project absolute numbers.

New Business

a. Planning Board

A September 29 joint meeting was scheduled with the Planning Board to introduce the Gateway Corridor project.

An unidentified member of the public urged the Authority to consider the work of the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority, which pointed out the need for sufficiently extensive research before proceeding.

Mr. Freidman mentioned the example of Penn State and State College, Pennsylvania.

Adjournment

At 9:20 p.m., Mr. Kelley moved adjournment and Mr. Coull seconded, and the motion passed unanimously, 3-0.

Addendum

Subsequent email from ARA member Aaron Hayden to Town Manager, to be entered into the public record:

Larry –

I thought to write out the points I made in my little statement last night on the trip to Hanover – I think they

are important for the published minutes since they connect what we learned on the trip with our list of goals:

1. Providing students with better housing options helped reduce the student problems in residential neighborhoods - One neighborhood was known as the “slum” because of the students in student apartments and the newly constructed better housing was able to attract enough students away from residential neighborhoods to a point that ALL the residential apartments in the Slums converted back to single family residences. (As a footnote the undergraduate housing was College supervised which also helped reduce the problem.)
2. The size of the project determines that range of its successes – redeveloping two full blocks allowed the creation of all the elements of a successful project;
 - a. essential services like a hardware store,
 - b. professional services like a dentist’s office,
 - c. entertainment like a pizzeria and café,
 - d. attractive residential units
 - e. creating a stable residential perimeter around the dense core.
 - f. Establish parking in the right area to encourage “car shedding”
3. Establish a clear perimeter to protect adjacent neighborhoods – by building residential units at the edge of the commercial area Hanover was able to stabilize the perimeter and relieve the nearby residential properties of the pressure of commercial development.
4. Unify the effort – having one body with clear goals at the center of the collaboration to negotiate the misunderstandings and tensions that arose seemed to keep the project on track for its lengthy gestation.
5. Getting the resources – the project involved a significant investment up front. The primary investor (Dartmouth College) was very robust (I used the term Sugar Daddy), a luxury we won’t have so the ARA, as the entity that will gather the resources, will have to carefully nurture resource support (especially in the face of the general Amherst distrust of change).
6. Car shedding – part of the success of the Hanover project was getting people out of their cars for a major part of their trip down town. They parked once and were able to walk to all the services they needed to for the day. We may not be able to bury the parking under our project (but wouldn’t that be nice) but should note the proximity of the parking to everything helped people stay out of their cars.
7. Make it appealing – the Hanover project had more than 5 architects designing major buildings which created an appealing and varied streetscape. It appeal helped attract people to get out of their cars and walk in the well designed and attractive circulation spaces and pause to take advantage of the outdoor cafes. There was also a lot of work to put in a lot of trees making it even more attractive.
8. Hanover is different than Amherst, sort of – the size of the two towns and the nature of the primary institutions is different but the specific issues are the same: students off campus cause the same problems, lack of attractive nearby services mean more driving, an organized effort with fulsome collaboration can lead to successful solutions that will benefit the nearby residents’ quality of life, the town tax base, the environment, the students’ quality of life and the local institutions’ competitiveness.

Thanks: Aaron